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Comprehension is seen as involving meaningful communication between author and reader. Different degrees of comprehension such as literal comprehension, evaluation, reorganization, and reaction are discussed, and experience, intelligence, language development, and decoding skills are noted as important factors which influence reading comprehension. In addition to perceptive questioning and group discussions, using a wide variety of materials, giving background information, and utilizing listening activities are included as teaching strategies for developing comprehension. Parental understanding of reading comprehension and how it is achieved is seen as an important contribution to the child's educational success. References are included. (RT)

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WHAT PARENTS SHOULD KNOW ABOUT READING COMPREHENSION

James F. Kerfoot

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Parents should understand reading instruction. They should understand its objectives and the general teaching strategies by which they are obtained. An active parental interest in education has always been an important factor in a child's success. Actively interested parents who understand the reading process can do much to facilitate their children's achievement. However, actively interested parents who lack basic understandings can create conditions which strongly bias against their children's growth in reading. What should parents know about reading comprehension? It is not easy to determine what teachers should know about comprehension. Presumably parents will not need to know as much, or perhaps parents should simply view comprehension from a different perspective.

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Parents Should Understand That The Purpose For Reading Is Comprehension.

They should recognize that word calling is not reading, and that until a meaningful communication is taking place between the author and the reader, there is no comprehension--there is no reading, by any acceptable definition of that process.

In an article on the nature of reading comprehension Cleland (1966, page 19) cited several definitions of reading including his own

in which he viewed reading as "establishment of rapport with an author." Other definitions indicated in Cleland's report included "the goal of all reading is a comprehension of meaning," (Dechant, 1964, page 353). "Comprehension is just a big blanket term that covers a whole area of thought getting processes in reading," (Smith, 1963, page 257). Bond and Wagner (1960, page 4) wrote that "reading is the process of acquiring an author's meaning and of interpreting, evaluating, and reflecting upon that meaning." Reading is thus defined by the great majority of writers in some meaning emphasis terms. While recognizing the necessity for decoding skill as a means, it is inescapable to concede that the purpose for reading is comprehension.

Parents Should Recognize That There Are Different Types of Comprehension.

Simple understanding of an author's message has been called literal comprehension. A child will grow in reading fluency until he is able to obtain from the printed page the same completeness of meaning he would have received if he had listened to the passage spoken to him.

Literal comprehension is most efficiently achieved when attention is directed to the meanings residing in units of different length and structure. At the word level, children will learn the meanings of many different words. Further a particular word may have a number of meanings to which children must respond. Other unit levels which require special attention include the phrase, the sentence, the paragraph, and the total selection. Each has its own unique structure and consequent comprehension problems.

In addition to literal comprehension, it must be understood that there are a number of purposes for which a child may read which require

some manipulation of the ideas in the selection. Inferences may be drawn, evaluations may be made; reorganization of the selection may take place for particular purposes. The reader will be challenged by a variety of conceptual content and a range of purposes which call for different responses to reading material. While the first objective of the comprehension program is to maximize the communication between author and reader at the level of literal comprehension, the second is to provide the reader with an effective range of thinking skills with which to appropriately manipulate the author's ideas in relation to the reader's purposes and his other experiences.

Many would argue that beyond literal comprehension the skills being developed are not reading at all, but thinking. While one would concede that much of the program is concerned with the uses to which reading may be put, it can be easily seen that important thinking skills taught in the reading comprehension program are best developed through reading, though they may in fact not be reading skills. Many classification schemes have been attempted for the reading comprehension skills. Although they are widely disparate in their specific nomenclature, the range of skills encompassed by most classifications is remarkably similar. The numerous thought getting processes thus identified are discretely evaluated and taught in the reading program.

Parents Should Understand the Factors Which Influence Reading Comprehension.

Comprehension is affected by decoding skills. Children who fail to derive meaning from reading may fail to do so because attention is intensively focused upon the recognition of words. It is difficult to maintain the meaning of a passage while struggling to identify its

several parts. It is essential that the reader develop fluency in word recognition if maximum comprehension is to be attained.

Comprehension is affected by intelligence. If comprehension is to be thought of as a network of thought getting processes, the upper limits to understanding will be set by the reader's thought getting abilities. The intellectual capacities of the learner will determine how effectively he will respond to a program emphasizing the high order manipulation of ideas.

Comprehension is affected by experience. It is axiomatic in reading instruction that the reader will "derive from the printed page only in proportion to the experiences which he brings to it," that the experiences provide the meanings. Even with the simplest concepts on which we base communication, there is a world of difference in the imagery of any two people. An author using the simple word "stream" will likely feel confident that his communication with the reader was direct and unambiguous. But no two readers who understand the word stream will visualize exactly the same stream. Each will differ in particulars. Each stream will exist in a particular setting, in a particular place, and be quite different from that of another reader or of the author. The meanings attained from the printed page are so dependent upon the experiences of the reader that it is doubtful whether comprehension as such can really be taught. As Schleich (1965, page 40) points out, "We can teach certain basic skills on which comprehension and interpretation rely in part. We cannot teach comprehension and interpretation because, as we know, comprehension and interpretation are based on past as well as present experience, and the wider and deeper the past experience, the

more background the reader has for making judgments, the better will be his comprehension and interpretation. It is a simple maxim, 'the more you bring to a book, the more you will take from it.' Experience and the concepts that relate to it come slowly and cumulatively, and no amount of skills 'teaching' can offset the lack of experience . . . breadth of vocabulary springing from experience."

Comprehension is affected by language development. Comprehension is dependent upon the fluency with which a reader decodes printed symbols into his already mastered oral language patterns. If oral language is inadequate there will be no fluency. Underlying reading is a spoken language into which written words must be translated. Inadequacy, in language fluency, in general and specialized vocabulary, or in the signal system which we try to represent in reading through punctuation will limit comprehension.

It should be clear to parents that while a program of specific comprehension skills is being developed, the reader must steadily over a long period of time be brought to higher and higher levels of word recognition, experience, and language facility. Parents can play a vital role in developing experiential and language backgrounds. Parents who provide children with many and varied real and vicarious experiences and expressive opportunities can powerfully influence comprehension growth.

Parents Should Understand That Several Strategies Will Be Used By Teachers To Develop Comprehension

1. Content will be varied. Significant growth in reading comprehension will be generated by exposing readers to varied content with specialized vocabulary and unique ways of thinking. The form in which

information is cast will differ among the content fields. An integrated program of comprehension development will therefore require a broad range of content exposures.

2. Understanding will be developed through preparation for reading. Before a reader is on his own with a selection, he will be prepared for the reading by his teacher. The interest and drive of the learner will be generated as the necessary backgrounds for understanding a selection are developed. Relevant experiences and specialized ways of thinking may be discussed and the vocabulary to be encountered will be carefully previewed. Through preparation for a selection, the reader can derive greater comprehension since he approaches the task possessing the essential specific backgrounds for understanding.

3. A meaningful setting will aid comprehension development. Among the several methods of teaching reading today, most present skills in a meaningful setting. Word recognition is taught in a real context of words in coherent sequences rather than in isolation. Whether or not word recognition is most readily learned under such conditions, it is certain that children will develop better reading comprehension when the setting in which learning takes place emphasizes meaning.

4. Comprehension willbe developed through listening activities. Listening and reading are closely related language forms. Both require of the learner an accurate literal reception and appropriate relational thinking. A child with word recognition difficulties can continue to grow in thought getting processes through listening activities while at the same time receiving instruction in word recognition with lower level, less complex material. Listening activities will support and add to the

reading comprehension program at all levels and will be frequently used by effective teachers.

5. Comprehension will be developed by perceptive questioning. The judicious use of questions setting the purposes for reading is the heart of the comprehension program. Teachers will ask readers a variety of questions to deliberately structure an appropriate range of thought patterns. If only questions calling for specific information are asked, readers will become effective fact gatherers and little else. If we wish children to be critical readers, then the questions they are asked must elicit critical thinking. If we wish them to draw inferences well, we must ask inferential questions. The carefully selected question is a powerful means for guiding readers toward more effective reading comprehension.

6. Comprehension will be developed through group interaction. Much use is currently being made of self instructional procedures for reading instruction. Such procedures have been demonstrated to be of value and have earned an important place in the classroom. Nevertheless, some of the most important outcomes of reading instruction, those aspects of reading comprehension which involve critical interpretation and analysis, may be best developed by the intensive interchange of ideas and the debate possible only in a group setting. Teachers are aware that the development of critical thinking will best occur as the reader's biases and standards are vigorously assailed. A classroom alive with debate is one in which the thought getting processes are under maximum challenge.

Parents will find in the modern classroom a program rich in its variety of reading material and in which language and experiential

backgrounds are steadily developing. They will observe children creatively responding to both listening and reading tasks. They will find teachers carefully preparing children for the difficulties of the selections to be read and setting purposes for reading which will generate greater breadth and depth of understanding. They will discover a climate of challenge and interaction in which children are catalyzed to critical analysis and open-mindedness in preparation for a future in which thought and understanding will, hopefully, prevail.

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